

AIR FORCE, COMMUNITY WILL MEET TO DISCUSS COAL-TO-LIQUIDS PLANT

By Peter Johnson

A top Air Force official has scheduled a town meeting for Jan. 30 in Great Falls to discuss a proposed coal-to-liquid-fuels plant that could be built at Malmstrom Air Force Base by a private developer.

Assistant Air Force Secretary William Anderson stressed the need for the country to wean itself from foreign energy and the advantages that Malmstrom could provide such a plant in a press release.

Col. Bob Griffin, senior military advisor to Anderson, said Air Force officials will explain their vision for the plant and take comments at a town meeting from 6-8 p.m. Jan. 30 in the Missouri Room, the former second floor ballroom at the Civic Center.

The Air Force also has scheduled an "Industry Day" forum the next day for potential business partners to learn about the area's assets.

As many as 70 to 100 private sector officials, including financiers, designers and developers, plus many local and state government officials, have been invited to a "technical, roll up the sleeves, working session," which will be closed to the public and media, Griffin said.

Anderson, who is in charge of installations, environment and logistics for the Air Force, visited Montana in October for meetings with Great Falls government and business leaders and Gov. Brian Schweitzer, an advocate of coal-to-liquid-fuels technology.

Anderson said at the time that the Air Force is considering partnering with a commercial interest to build a 20,000- to 30,000-barrel-a-day plant at Malmstrom by as early as 2011. Members of Montana's congressional delegation have said that as many as 1,000 people could be employed during construction with 300 to 400 permanent plant operators.

"That's still the scope of the plant we envision," Griffin said Tuesday, adding that industry developers and designers could suggest other proposals after viewing the Malmstrom site on Industry Day, including a bigger or smaller plant.

Anderson said the Air Force is doing its part to address the nation's energy dependence, which he called both a financial challenge and a national security risk since "large portions of dwindling petroleum reserves are controlled by regimes not necessarily friendly to the United States.

"President Bush has challenged our nation to wean itself off its addiction to foreign oil," Anderson said, adding the Air Force is helping by converting its fleet of aircraft to synthetic jet fuel.

A plant built and operated by a private developer on underutilized Malmstrom property could produce the synthetic fuel the Air Force intends to use for its aircraft, he said.

Malmstrom is a good site because of the proximity of rich and abundant coal in southeastern Montana, needed water from the nearby Missouri River and a good rail transport system, he added.

"If successful, this opportunity will bring new jobs and capital to Great Falls," Anderson said. The plant would use new, clean-coal technology and "would not adversely impact Malmstrom's current missions or the quality of life of the installation's airmen," he said.

Last fall, Malmstrom supporters, including Warren Wenz, the longtime leader of the Chamber of Commerce Committee of 80 lobbying group, expressed concerns that the proposed site for the 700-acre plant and buffer area would cross the middle of Malmstrom's runway, which has been closed to flying for a decade, and also be near the base missile wing's weapons storage area, where nuclear warheads are kept.

"The Committee of 80 supports the development of alternative energy sources to lessen our nation's dependence on foreign oil," Wenz said Tuesday. "But we do not think such efforts should interfere with long-term operations at Malmstrom, including the ability to attract new (flying) missions."

Griffin said the Air Force's preliminary plan still involves the same placement of the proposed plant and its buffer areas.

"There has been no flying mission at Malmstrom for more than a decade and the 2005 Base Realignment and Closure commission plan did not discuss the possibility of reopening the Malmstrom runway," Griffin said. "So a potential flying mission at the base is not germane to discussions about putting a coal-to-liquid-fuel plant there."

However, base officials have expressed preliminary concerns about the plant's potential impact on security and other aspects of the existing missile mission, he said.

Great Falls Development Authority President Brett Doney called the high-tech plant "a very exciting prospect for the area that could create high-wage jobs and could attract more investments in clean-emissions energy development for Great Falls."

Doney, who has been talking with Air Force officials about the project for four months, said it's still in the early planning stages and the exact location, scope and size of the plant probably will not be determined until a developer is chosen and designs the plant with Air Force officials.

"Neither the development authority nor the Air Force Space Command would support any project that hinders the primary mission of maintaining missiles," he said.